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THE STUDY OF THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE¹

A. E. TUTTLE

Principal, Bellows Falls High School, Bellows Falls, Vt.

Whether teachers of English or of Mathematics, I believe that we all desire, and make an earnest effort, to enable our pupils to understand the expressed thoughts of others, and to express their own thoughts in good form; and we all seek to give them some acquaintance with the best in our literature and some appreciation of it. But the realization of these results makes necessary not only the most skilfully devised schemes of operation, to be executed by skilled specialists, but also the correlation of all the other work of the schools so as to emphasize the importance of the English.

Here, as in every other department, the individuality of the teacher is a most important factor. The teacher who loves good literature and reads good books, and talks with the pupils about these good books; whose language is always well considered and carefully selected, rarely displaying any agitation or emotion, expressed in well-modulated and cultivated tones, with most careful enunciation and accurate pronunciation, of such a quality as to command and hold the fixed attention of all the pupils; whose manners furnish a constant display of ease, refinement, and culture—such a teacher, although giving instruction in history, will do much toward the attainment of the desired results in English. And in proportion as these qualities are lacking in a teacher, we may expect the pupil to be deficient in knowledge of, and in ability to use, good English.

Those of us whose experience has been limited to the work of the secondary schools find some things which we think ought to be done differently, or better, in the elementary schools; and, I am sure, the college men can say the same of the secondary schools. Now, as we tell each other these things, and are honest in our work, better conditions must naturally follow.

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It is not unusual for pupils to enter the high school with serious defects in their pronunciation, which are not due to any defects in the organs of speech. Many of my pupils say *haitch* for *h*; are careless, and in many cases apparently ignorant, of the proper pronunciation of final syllables such as *-ing* and *-ed*; invariably say *becuz* for *because*, *fer* instead of *for*; and I have in mind one boy, of exceptional mental ability, who has absolutely no conception of the proper sound to be given to some of the letters, as, for example, a final *x*. He always pronounces *six* as though it were spelled *s-i-t-s*. I have undertaken and accomplished a reformation in some of these cases, but it takes time—much more time than would have been necessary if undertaken at the proper time, during their most impressionable years. Some teachers seem to cherish the delusions of fond parents, that childish imperfections in speech are cunning, and ought not to be corrected, as they will be outgrown naturally. Some are, but many are not. I have a cousin, forty years of age, who uses today many of the “cunning” expressions characteristic of his childhood. I believe that here is an important work for the elementary teachers.

The makers of textbooks for the lower schools seem to have fallen in with this idea of encouraging our young people to use childish and inaccurate terms. It is just as well for the child to learn the correct terms and names when the occasion requires their use, as to learn a substitute, and then later be obliged to lay that aside and learn the real thing. Why not become familiar with the terms “declarative sentence,” “exclamatory sentence,” “interrogative sentence,” “interrogation point,” first as last? When a child begins to investigate the science of numbers, why not call it work in arithmetic, instead of “number work”? Many of us studied an English grammar that placed considerable stress upon the conjugation of the verb, giving the indicative mood, with the present, imperfect, future, perfect, pluperfect, and future perfect tenses; the potential mood, with the present, imperfect, perfect, and pluperfect tenses; the subjunctive mood, with two tenses; and the imperative, infinitive, and participles so similar to the conjugations in the Latin grammars, when we make the English potential the Latin subjunctive. None of my pupils know anything of an English potential, and I have hunted in vain for many years to find a modern textbook that makes any mention of this subject.

I have, however, been pleased to see that one of the very latest publications gives the conjugation almost exactly as it was in the old Weld and Quackenboss. Probably there is little question that the drill we had on conjugations was of great assistance to us in mastering the inflections of the foreign languages, and those of us who teach the classics will welcome a more thorough drill along these lines. It seems to me that the idea, so generally and forcefully advocated fifteen years ago, of curtailing the amount of time and effort to be devoted to the study of formal grammar, has been carried to the other extreme, like many of the plans of the so-called new education. For I generally find it necessary, when teaching the classics, to devote a great deal of time to drill on points in formal English grammar. And so I would plead for more of this old-fashioned drill, or at least more of the old-fashioned results in the way of accurate knowledge.

Also the matter of pronunciation is another where teachers in other departments may supplement the work of the English teacher. Pupils are constantly mispronouncing words with which they ought to be familiar, as well as new words which they prefer to guess at rather than take the trouble to go to a dictionary. And even teachers are not free from this same fault. Years afterward I have discovered myself using an incorrect pronunciation which I had acquired from a former instructor and had accepted as authoritative without ever consulting a dictionary; and as I have heard teachers say *libry* for *library*, *histry* for *history*, *mēdiæval* for *mēdiæval*, *āternate* and *āwlternate* for *alternate*, *labratory* for *laboratory*, and even writing this last word on the board as pronounced, I have become satisfied that many teachers need to be on the alert lest they become unreliable guides. Do any of our pupils know any of the simple rules for pronunciation? I don't find any in my school that know the rule for making *c* and *g* soft before *e*, *i*, and *y*, *æ* and *oe*. And when it comes to the matter of giving the correct English pronunciation for many of the proper names which are encountered in the classics, the average pupil seems to have no remembrance of the ordinary sounds of the letters he is using in his regular conversation. Recently a pupil encountered the proper noun *Labi-enus*; and the variety of sounds he suggested for those different vowels was quite a revelation in experimentation. I believe that we should

be very particular in this matter, and not allow any slipshod, or careless, guesses to go uncorrected.

In this connection we find that there are many monstrosities in the way of pronunciation that are simply provincialisms, as well as many peculiar uses and combinations of words. It seems that these evils might be easily eradicated if attacked with a firm hand in the lower grades. And we must all of us constantly insist on the use of just the right word in the right place. Precision cannot be taught by rule; it comes rather as the result of care and long practice, especially in writing, by which the writer ultimately attains an exquisite skill in selecting those words, and only those, which exactly convey his thought.

Closely allied to provincialisms are slang phrases. Slang words may have some vogue for a few months or years, but they usually give place to other phrases, which in turn run a brief career. Some slang is more picturesque and forcible than more dignified phrases; but we certainly ought to discourage all such tendencies most positively, and insist on the use of the very best language possible. Only recently I heard a high-school boy attempt to participate in a debate; and it was really painful to witness the poverty of his vocabulary. As much of his time is spent on the street, in club-rooms, attending basket-ball games, and in similar places of resort, and a very small portion of his time is spent in communion with good books, his command of language is such as must naturally be expected.

Occasionally we find pupils who are inclined to go to the other extreme, and betray the crudity of their taste by using pretentious phrases, or even offering us sentences or paragraphs from Addison or Johnson as their own composition. Such inclinations cannot receive too strenuous treatment.

Also we may render helpful service to the teacher of English by encouraging, and even demanding, a careful use of the dictionary. Pupils are sometimes surprised to find how the difficulty of pronouncing Greek and Latin proper names is simplified when they go to the dictionary. But we should also encourage them to read further than the pronunciation and definition of the words. They should note the variety and shades of meaning, the proper use of the word with its different meanings illustrated by sentences from the best authors, the

synonomous terms; and the classical students should give careful attention to the etymologies. It is also well to call attention to the fact that there is some very interesting reading in the opening pages of most dictionaries, especially in *Webster's* and the *Standard*, and that here are some of the rules for spelling and pronunciation which, if committed to memory, would be of great assistance. Many of our students, even in high schools, do not know how to use the dictionary intelligently and profitably; and I wonder how many of us are leaving them to work this matter out in their own way.

In correcting the faulty expressions used by pupils in the class, I believe that a mistake is sometimes made of placing too much emphasis on the incorrect form, calling special attention to that, and sometimes causing it to be repeated several times. It would be better to drop the fault at once, have the correct form given, and repeated and emphasized until there can be no possibility of failure to understand what the correct expression is. And so the exercises given in many of the textbooks devoted to the consideration and correction of faulty English expressions seem to me to be open to the same objection, that they give undue prominence to faults which ought never to be seen or heard. For I believe that it is a fact which no one will question that if a person reads nothing but the best literature, and hears nothing but pure English, he will easily acquire a vocabulary of pure English words.

And this brings us to the consideration of the most important topic we shall take up in this connection, the one on which so much stress was placed last evening: the reading and careful study of English masterpieces. For several years this practice has been receiving constantly increasing attention, but there is very generally a chance for improvement in the way of intense, analytical study. To make my idea perfectly clear to you I cannot do better than to quote from Franklin's *Autobiography*:

At this time I met with an old volume of the *Spectator*. I had never before seen any of them. I bought it, read it over and over, and was much delighted with it. I thought the writing excellent, and wished it possible to imitate it. With that in view, I took some of the papers, and making short hints of the sentiments in each sentence, laid them by a few days, and then, without looking at the book, tried to complete the papers again, by expressing each sentiment at length, and as fully as it had been expressed before, in any suitable words that should occur to

me. Then I compared my *Spectator* with the original, discovered some of my faults, and corrected them. But I found I wanted a stock of words, or a readiness in recollecting and using them, which I thought I should have acquired before that time, if I had gone on making verses; since the continual search for words of the same import, but of a different length to suit the measure, or of different sound for the rhyme, would have laid me under a constant necessity of searching for variety, and also have tended to fix that variety in my mind, and make me master of it. Therefore I took some of the tales in the *Spectator* and turned them into verse; and, after a time, when I had pretty well forgotten the prose, turned them back again.

I also jumbled my collection of hints into confusion, and after some weeks endeavored to reduce them into the best order, before I began to form the full sentences and complete the subject. This was to teach me method in the arrangement of my thoughts. By comparing my work with the original, I discovered many faults and corrected them, but I sometimes had the pleasure to fancy that in certain particulars of small consequence I had been fortunate enough to improve the method or the language; and this encouraged me to think that I might in time come to be a tolerable English writer, of which I was extremely ambitious.

Although Franklin was denied the advantage of such privileges and instruction as our pupils enjoy, I believe he did manage to become a tolerable English writer; and possibly, if we could incorporate some of these ideas into our methods, the English which our pupils submit would, in time, come to be somewhat more tolerable than is now the case.

But, in order to get the best results, in this as in other departments, we must have specialists in this particular line of work—teachers who have devoted much time to preparation for teaching in this special field. And when we get a teacher for our secondary schools, or for any grade, wouldn't it be better to get one who has had this special training, and let the other subjects take care of themselves, rather than let the English go begging, as is usually done? I feel quite confident that, if I had a high school with one assistant, I should want that assistant to be an English specialist. And those of us whose humble lot it is to be coadjutors in this great work can find some inspiration and some ideas that may be of assistance in our instruction by reference to the dictionary and to the many books on English words.

I feel sure that we are getting much better general results today than was the case a few years ago; and, as we get a more general

spirit of co-operation in our teaching force to secure better English, and as we all recognize that as the goal of great importance, the results in future years may be still more gratifying.

DISCUSSION

A. B. MYRICK, University of Vermont: Coming as I do from another, though related, department, I feel that I am something of an interloper in opening the present discussion. But there are two points in Professor Tuttle's topic which I wish especially to emphasize as an outsider myself. The first is that the general teacher can co-operate most effectively with the teacher of English. As we were told last night by Dr. Sykes, much can be done in the classroom by authority and suggestion in the correction and elimination of faulty expressions. Even in the reciting of lessons in entirely different subjects, it seems to me, much good can be done by the general teacher, if he be but willing to interest himself so far as to correct slipshod English in answers to his questions.

And among the general teachers I am sure that none can be of greater service than the teacher of modern languages. The value which the study of languages may have for the student of English admits, I think, of no question. The frequent exercise of translation into English, whether by careful preparation or at sight, affords a training in the selection of word and phrase which is invaluable. Here it is, then, that the English teacher's work may best be seconded.

There are always some bright pupils to whom the selection of fitting equivalents for the original is a gift needing, comparatively speaking, but little development from his master. But, on the other hand, there is the great mass of duller and slower scholars who must be helped by authority or suggestion continuously and patiently.

In general, there are two things of which the modern-language teacher must be most careful: the training of the pupil to avoid the harsh and unpleasant literal rendering into English, and to render distinctive foreign idioms by appropriate English ones. In several years' teaching of language, what I have had most to contend with is the general tendency of the student to render his text with absolute literalness, with infinite damage to good, fair English. I am not by any means alone in this experience; most of us, I think, are fighting this tendency day by day. A part of our duty, then, in teaching French or German, or what not, is to lead the student by constant precept or example to order his translation with a view to its fairness and grace without impairing the thought. The instructor may do that best, especially in elementary classes, by the frequent repeating of translations made by his pupils, remedying awkwardness of construction, and replacing ill-chosen words by those whose connotation is more exact. In the choice of words let the teacher and the pupil be not too squeamish about the selection of good literary or poetical words. It is unfortunately true that only too many instructors and students seem to have a peculiar fear of them. At the outset, in

reading foreign poetry, it is extremely difficult to get the student to translate the pronouns "thou" and "thee," for example, and it is quite the same with other words which are obviously poetical. The student feels at first that he has done something to be ashamed of in making a fair poetical rendering. Here the instructor should be ever ready to urge it upon the unwilling, and support the good but feeble intentions of the rest.

Too literal translations often destroy fine proverbial expressions which, it seems to me, is one of the great elements of strength in any language. Next to Spanish, our English is perhaps richest in such expression, and it cannot but pain the conscientious teacher to be a witness to unwitting attempts to kill it off. The following extravagant translation for the French proverb, *Voir c'est croire*, is one actually received from a former student: "You can never believe a thing unless you see it." It is difficult to understand such a translation when it seems as if our good English proverb, "Seeing is believing," must have rung in his ears from childhood. Let us, then, be constantly on the watch for just that sort of thing, and be ever ready to supply the raciest and most idiomatic English translation or equivalent.

If such a method be followed out consistently, the teacher will see the fine fruit ripening within a surprisingly short time. That, at least, has been my experience, and it has been the experience of many friends engaged in teaching the same languages.

To conclude, then, let the modern-language teacher do all that lies in his power to supplement the work of the English department. Everyone can do something in that direction ; for, however small his training, every teacher can bring something better to his pupils.